

# Macron versus the workers

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A year after his election, Macron and his République en Marche (LREM) movement have nailed their neo-liberal colours to the mast. Most obviously, the French President and his cronies have organized a wholesale transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich, through the suppression of the Wealth Tax, the ISF, and a whole raft of other tax measures destined to ease the lives of those who already have everything. The suppression of Exit Tax facilitates the tax evasion of the rich, and will result in a net loss to the state of at least 800 million euros, though the figure could be as high as 3.5 billion. The disappearance of this disincentive to fiscal evasion is a green light to tax dodgers everywhere. The wealthy can also claim tax relief on personal services like gardening, housekeepers and nannies. In a series of tax reforms that can only be described as robbing the poor to pay the rich, wealth has trickled up in Macron's France.

Simultaneously, Macron's team is ripping the social welfare system apart. Housing benefits have been cut, subsidies to low paid workers withdrawn, and the government is preparing for an onslaught on what workers still have. This can be seen in a video clip of the President banging his fist on the table, saying 'we put a crazy amount of dough into benefits' and complaining that 'the poor stay poor'. The neoliberal Macron says people have to be 'made responsible' for helping themselves; 'We must prevent poverty and make people take more responsibility for themselves to break out of poverty', he said.<sup>1</sup> That means slashing benefits and forcing people into low-paid employment.

In a speech worthy of Margaret Thatcher, given at a conference of health insurance company CEOs, he

vowed to reform the 'moth-eaten' welfare system.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the government's savage public sector job cuts make it hard for anyone to help themselves attain gainful employment. The government has announced the generalization of contract work throughout the civil service and has cut the number of recruits into the teaching profession who enter through the state exams like the CAPES and the Agrégation. Hospitals are also constrained by austerity budgets and staff are at breaking point in many public and private institutions.

But this is not nearly enough for Macron, who has undertaken to break the power of an organized labour movement that has been the bane of France's bosses since May 1968. To do this, he announced that he was taking on the rail workers, in what commentators have likened to Thatcher's battle with the miners. In 1995, the rail workers were at the core of the nationwide revolt that put paid to conservative Prime Minister Alain Juppé's attempts to dismantle the social welfare system. Over twenty years later, the conservatives still want revenge for that defeat. Thus, Macron announced the 'reform' of the nationwide railway network run by the SNCF. This was presented in terms of modernizing the rail network and putting 'privileged' railway workers on an equal footing with other, less well-off workers.

SNCF employees have a recognized status allowing them early retirement and some protection from being laid off, but working conditions are often difficult. Night and weekend work is customary, and workers are under obligation to work all over the country, regardless of family circumstances. In total, the SNCF employs 146,000 rail workers, around half the number

it employed in 1970. Nevertheless, the SNCF is the last remaining symbol of a public service with a militant, unionized workforce, capable of defending its own working conditions and everyone else's, as the 1995 conflict showed. Macron's attack is more about imposing neoliberal ideology and union-bashing than about modernizing the SNCF. During the media debate on the question, his ministers had no reply to the argument that France did not want its railways to go the way of the British ones. Having no arguments, the government pushed the necessary laws through parliament using directives that short-circuited any debate. Even the limited opportunity offered in parliament for opposing the reform was confiscated.

In order to privatize more easily, the government wanted to transfer whole categories of SNCF employees directly to the private sector. Rail workers resistance to this plan was solid from the beginning and strike action

was decided in early spring. A joint union committee (Intersyndicale) composed of the CGT, UNSA, SUD, FO and the CFDT announced 36 strike days, with two days strike every week for every three days worked. The strike days were massively supported, with 77% of train drivers on strike – 35% of all categories of employees. These figures made it the biggest strike seen in a long time.

The rail workers' action coincided with a series of strikes and demonstrations by civil servants in protest against the reforms announced by the government. On 22 March, over 323,000 people, including postal and rail workers, Air France personnel, and civil servants, demonstrated all over France. Alongside demonstrating, Air France pilots and cabin crews also went out on strike. To counter the strike at Air France, management called a referendum on the proposed new working conditions, hoping to gain a victory by polling



Photo: CrowdSpark/Alamy Live News

*Paris 22 March 2018: Thousands march during a demonstration to protest against French government's string of reforms. Seven trade unions have called on public sector workers to strike, including school and hospital staff, civil servants and air traffic controllers. More than 140 protests were planned across France.*

workers at home by internet. But the results came as a shock. Over 80% of employees participated, and 55% of them rejected the new deal. The fallout was such that Air France CEO Jean-Marc Janaillac resigned. With the rail workers doing the heavy lifting, other groups felt strong enough to take on their bosses.

But the rolling strike made it difficult to maintain the dynamic of the struggle. The question was debated in big strike meetings at the stations, but the striking workers voted consistently to stay within the framework laid down by the intersyndicale – the all out strike was rejected in favour of two days' strike per week. This has allowed the union bureaucracy to keep control of the movement. Ten weeks on, the percentage of workers striking has dropped, but is still significant. On May 14<sup>th</sup>, the overall strike rate was 27.5% with 75% of train drivers and ticket collectors on strike. On June 12<sup>th</sup>, the overall percentage of strikers was put at 17% for all categories of employees, but with 53.4% of train drivers off work.<sup>3</sup> Public support for the strikers has remained solid, with 44% of people saying they believed the strike was justified in an IFOP survey on May 2-3<sup>rd</sup>.

The movement is still alive, but an all-out strike is needed to capitalize on the workers' anger with Macron. The government claims it is willing to negotiate, but is merely playing a waiting game; even the most conservative unions, like the CFDT, are forced admit that they have been offered nothing at the negotiating table. Nevertheless, the CFDT has called for the strike to be suspended during the upcoming baccalaureate exams for secondary school students. Clearly, the tactics of the union bureaucracy have led the rail workers into a blind alley. The workers need to take their strike out of the hands of the union bureaucracy and stop all trains moving until they win.

Even if no major group of workers has gone on strike alongside the rail workers, their struggle has inspired other employees, particularly in the health sector and education. After 19 days on hunger strike, 10 members of staff, mainly union reps, at Rouen's psychiatric hospital won a promise of 30 nursing jobs and the opening of a special unit for adolescent patients. Hospital staff in Le Havre are now adopting the same tactics.

The rail workers struggle also helped turn what looked like an easy victory for Macron – higher education reform – into a major struggle. University education in

France has been open to all students who have passed the baccalaureate exam at the end of secondary school. Registration fees are relatively low, at around 300 or 400 euros per year, although they have been rising over the past few years. But lack of investment coupled with a huge increase in the student population as a result of a 'baby boom' at the beginning of the 2000s has led to a crisis situation. Overcrowded lecture theatres and the systematic use of contract staff for teaching and administrative work has led to a chaotic situation in most universities, which have been made financially dependent on regional aid after the state disengaged from funding them in 2009.

In a maneuver aimed at opening up the universities to privatization, the government denounced the poor results and high failure rates among first year students (around 40% of them make it through to second year without repeating). The neoliberal answer to this was to introduce selection criteria, which would eliminate the candidates considered unsuitable. Under the new system, called Parcoursup, secondary school head teachers would give an opinion as to whether a school-leaver had the capacity to succeed at university, and university lecturers would establish a list of criteria for admission to their department. The lecturers would then examine all the applications and classify them in order of suitability. University administrators, including most of the presidents of the cash-starved establishments, jumped at the chance to cut costs by refusing thousands of students. Even before the bill went through parliament, university lecturers were asked to create commissions to examine student applications.

But the university lecturers' union SNESUP declared that its members would refuse to take part in the selection process. It argued that selection would ineluctably lead to the exclusion of the most disadvantaged populations, the poor and the working classes. A second argument was that university lecturers were already overburdened with administrative duties and were in no position to take on the work of examining hundreds of applications. In 24 hours, over 400 university lecturers signed a public declaration refusing to apply selection procedures. This was published on radio station France Inter's website and gave impetus to other initiatives. Representatives from the different universities met and called for strike action. The internal resistance was such

that in some cases university presidents declared that their establishment would refuse to select incoming students. In other cases, the refusal took place at faculty level.

While resistance from the traditionally militant secondary school students was quite weak, the universities themselves became centers of resistance, with occupations of lecture theatres and big general assemblies in which actions were voted on. Exam Halls were blocked and administrative buildings occupied. Things came to a head when a student occupation in Montpellier University was attacked by a gang of fascist thugs, who were brought in by the Dean of the Law faculty. The fascist gang included law faculty lecturers with links to far-right political organizations. The public outcry at this was so great, and the reaction of solidarity in the universities was so extensive, that the Dean was suspended and had to resign from his position. But Macron and his allies were not embarrassed by the fascist attacks on students. They sent in the riot police, the CRS, to forcibly evacuate student occupations, something not seen since May 1968. Anywhere students began to organize, university presidents simply shut down their buildings. Thus, over a dozen universities, including Sorbonne-I, Nanterre, Rouen, and Montpellier, were shut down, with students and staff facing a *de facto* lockout.

The resistance was not widespread enough to force the government to back down. The first round of offers quickly confirmed what opponents of *Parcoursup* feared most: the selection process was based on social criteria, with pupils from the wealthier parisian lycées getting preference. In some of the poorer suburbs of Paris, the refusal rate was as high as 80% for some schools. It quickly became clear that the establishment of origin was a determining factor in the success or failure of a university application.

Despite the weaknesses of the movement against *Parcoursup*, it is clear that the government was surprised by the scale of the resistance, and the rapidity with which it spread. Faced with a potential conflagration, the government quickly resorted to the tried and tested tactic of using Islamophobia to divide the movement. Thus 19-year-old Myriam Pougetoux, the hijab-wearing president of the UNEF student's union at the Sorbonne – Paris IV, was subjected to a nationwide campaign of

vitriol in the press and on the social networks.

This campaign was given impetus by the Minister for Equality, Marlène Schiappa, who claimed Pougetoux's hijab was proof of her support for the agenda of 'political Islam'. Education Minister Michel Blanquer added to this by saying the UNEF was giving expression to communitarianism. What was new, and very positive, was the UNEF's spirited defence of Pougetoux. In a statement on May 13th, the organization declared that, 'Our union defends the principles of secularism and feminism, and it is in the name of these principles that we defend the right of students to make their own choices, including that of wearing the hijab...' Furthermore, the union condemned 'the wave of racist, sexist and islamophobic hatred of which Myriam is a victim'.<sup>4</sup>

The wave of resistance is giving new impetus to a left-wing opposition, which had been inaudible in a parliament dominated by Macron's LREM deputies and the conservative LR (The Republicans). May Day saw widespread mobilisations but the news was dominated by pictures of riot police affronting demonstrators, while claiming to be responding to the violence of Black Block anarchists. In spite of the government's denunciation of 'violence', the left continued to call demonstrations, which were popular and successful. For example, the radical journalist François Ruffin, who was elected deputy as part of Jean-Luc Melenchon's France Insoumise (France Unbowed) movement, called a demonstration to mark the anniversary of Macron's election. He called it Macron's Party (La Fête à Macron), an ironic slogan which promised that Macron was going to catch hell. On May 5th, at least 40,000 people (police statistics) came out to protest at the government's policies in a joyful carnival atmosphere. On May 26th, different struggles came together in a 'popular tidal wave', a demonstration against Macron's policies called by leaders of the left, including FI's Jean-Luc Melenchon, Olivier Besancenot of the NPA (New Anticapitalist Party) and the CGT. Anti-racist activists mixed with students against *Parcoursup* and rail workers against privatization. Around 32,000 people came out in Paris to take part, with the CGT giving figures of 250,000 demonstrators across France. The desire for unity was summed up in a photo of a veiled woman with a Palestinian flag holding up a sign saying

‘Justice For All – Palestine, Rail Workers, Students, Immigrants...’<sup>5</sup>

Even though not everyone joined the demonstrations, discontent with the new President and his government is rife.

In spite of media hype presenting the Macrons as the new Kennedys, opinion polls show a different picture. An Elabe poll in January 2018 showed that only 42% of those polled had confidence in the President. The details revealed that while 52% of managers and retirees were convinced, only 30% of workers and employees trusted him. Only 37% trusted the Prime Minister, Edouard Philippe, and this included only 23% of workers and employees.<sup>6</sup> In April, a BVA poll confirmed that only a minority believed in Macron, with nearly 60% of those polled saying they were unhappy with his policies. A staggering 84% affirmed that they had not benefitted in any way from these policies. The government comes across as a government for the rich, elitist and out of touch. The Minister for Public Accounts, Gerald Darmanin, declared on radio that there were ‘far too many’ social welfare benefits. When asked how many benefits there were, he replied that he had no idea, he just knew there were too many.<sup>7</sup> This kind of high-handedness shows the government’s elitism and contempt for the working class.

Faced with widespread discontent with its policies, Macron and LREM have to fall back more and more on racism and anti-immigration rhetoric to get the support of the most bigoted sections of the population. In February 2018, the government presented a new set of laws aimed at reducing the number of asylum seekers granted refugee status. This involved increasing the legal duration for which an asylum-seeker can be held in a centre, shortening the time allowed for applications for refugee status, introducing ‘fast-track’ processing of demands, and giving less time for appeals if the demand is rejected. Numerous associations and charities have rejected these new laws, which are considered to be extremely dangerous and likely to worsen the situation for a large number of foreigners. In Paris, undocumented immigrants are hounded by the police, and regularly rounded up and taken away to undisclosed locations. But when an illegal immigrant from Mali, Mamadou Gassama, became a national hero after climbing to a 4th-floor balcony to save a child who

was about to fall, Macron’s government had to move quickly to offer the young man French nationality and a job, so that his popularity did not bring criticism of government immigration policies.

The government’s brutality towards refugees and asylum-seekers reached new depths on June 11<sup>th</sup> when it refused to allow the *Aquarius*, a ship carrying 629 migrants, including pregnant women and children, to dock at any French port. When Corsican nationalist leader Jean-Guy Talamoni offered to let the *Aquarius* dock in Corsica, the government cited international maritime law as the reason it could not allow this. French ministers then took to the airwaves to explain that they did not wish to set a precedent, claiming that it was Italy’s duty to take the migrants. This forced the migrants to undertake another 700km journey in atrocious weather conditions, heading for the Spanish port of Valencia. In a week in which at least 40 migrants drowned in the Mediterranean, Macron’s government showed its true, brutal face to the entire world.

The past year of Macron’s rule has been marked by a full-scale attack on workers’ rights, coupled with brutal, authoritarian responses to any form of resistance. Nevertheless, that resistance continues to simmer and to boil over into strike action, demonstrations, and other forms of mass opposition. There are no signs that this resistance is about to disappear, whatever the outcome of the current wave of struggles.

## Notes

1 ‘Macron reveals hand in off-the-cuff comments on welfare spending.’ Editorial Staff, *Mediapart*, June 13, 2018.

2 ‘Macron launches reform of ‘moth-eaten’ welfare system.’ Manuel Jardinaud, *Mediapart*, June 15, 2018.

3 ‘SNCF : légère hausse du taux de grévistes’ AFP, June 12 2018.

4 ‘L’Unef critiquée pour sa responsable voilée’ Bernard Gorce, *La Croix*, May 22, 2018.

5 ‘Marée populaire’ : à Paris, un méli-mélo réussi, Pauline Graulle et Michel Deléan, *Mediapart*, May 26, 2018.

6 ‘Macron : l’impopularité persiste et s’enracine parmi les travailleurs. *Mediapart*, 6 January 2018.

7 ‘Il y a ‘trop’ d’aides sociales pour Gérald Darmanin.’ L’Express, May 29, 2018.